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MODERNITY AND DANGER: *THE BOY KUMASENU* AND THE WORK OF THE GOLD COAST FILM UNIT¹

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Introduction

At the beginning of *The Boy Kumasenu* (dir. Sean Graham, 1952) the teenage protagonist, Kumasenu (Nortey Engmann), is introduced and aurally shadowed by a voice-over narration that explains his predicament as an orphaned boy from an unnamed fishing village in the Gold Coast.² We learn that Kumasenu seeks to venture beyond traditional village life towards modern educational and social institutions of national citizenship. With the support of educated and compassionate fellow citizens, Kumasenu learns to avoid the pitfalls of petty criminality in the city. His intimidating cousin and antagonist, Agboh (Frank Tamak-

¹ The authors would like to thank participants at the 2010 Cadbury Workshop, Centre of West African Studies, University of Birmingham, for a discussion on orphans in popular culture. In particular, we are grateful to Justina Dugbazah for translating the name “Kumasenu,” and to Patrick Oloko, Shani Omari, Leon Tsambu, Julie Archambault, Karin Barber, and Katrien Pype for insightful and stimulating comments. Kate Skinner would also like to thank the Nuffield Foundation for financing part of the research on which this article is based.

² According to the catalogues of the period there were two versions of *The Boy Kumasenu*, a six-reel short version (63 minutes), and a ten-reel long version (95 minutes). The discussion in this article is based on the 63-minute version of the film. We have not been able to locate the ten-reel 95-minute version. For additional catalogue information, please refer to the two catalogues: (i) *The Gold Coast Film Unit: 1949-1953*. Edited by the Gold Coast Film Unit: Gold Coast, 1953. British Film Institute Library. Pamphlet 791.4: 966.7. (ii) *Films from the Gold Coast: 1954-1955. Second Catalogue and Revised Price List of Gold Coast Film Unit Productions*. February 1956. Gold Coast Film Unit. British Film Institute Library. Pamphlet 791.4: 966.7. As far as we are able to tell, most recent commentary about the film has been derived from the 63-minute version, which is the version held at the British Film Institute. For this short version of the film, please see <http://www.colonialfilm.org.uk/node/332>, accessed on 14 February 2011.

loe), provides a foil for Kumasenu's march towards his place as citizen-subject along the horizon of decolonization: whereas Agboh becomes a gangster, Kumasenu finds gainful employment as a member of a motorized fishing boat crew, thanks to the intervention of Dr Tamakloe (Oku Ampofo) and his wife, Grace (Rosina Oku Ampofo).

In this article we explore how the film is informed by, but also reveals, contradictions within British colonial film production and the uses of film in late colonial social policy. *The Boy Kumasenu* was produced by the Gold Coast Film Unit and directed by Sean Graham, who also served as head of the unit. Recognized at the Venice Film Festival, and nominated for "Best Film from any Source" by the British Academy of Film and Television Arts in 1953, *The Boy Kumasenu* was not simply innovative in its mode of addressing a colonial audience. It also took on a life of its own as a popular film among Ghanaian audiences.³ According to Chris Hesse (a former director of the Ghana Film Industry Corporation), *The Boy Kumasenu* was a seminal film that "turned the whole of Accra upside down." Indeed, it influenced his own decision to train as a filmmaker because "It showed us that we could make films and stars out of our own selves."⁴ Instead of it merely being a colonial propaganda film organized around a coming of age story, the film was significant for the emergence of Ghanaian cinema, and it brings to life a more complex and contradictory

³ Tom Rice, "The Boy Kumasenu." Tom Rice has prepared this well-documented filmography for the British Film Institute website as part of the Colonial Cinema Project. The filmography will be posted on the British Film Institute website shortly. Thanks to Tom Rice, Emma Sandon, and the project, *Colonial Film: Images of the British Empire*, led by Colin MacCabe and Lee Grieveson, for their support for our work.

⁴ Interview with Chris Hesse, La, Accra, 23 June 2010. This interview was conducted by Kate Skinner at Hesse's home. Hesse joined the Gold Coast Film Unit as a trainee in 1952. During his long career, he worked as a cameraman for Kwame Nkrumah, and later became a director of the Ghana Film Industry Corporation. He retired in 1994, shortly before the privatization of the state media.

context for film-making in this period of political transition.⁵

Through our contextual analysis of the film, we identify some of the complex political and creative influences that shaped the work of the Gold Coast Film Unit. *The Boy Kumasenu* was commissioned in order to represent to a colonial audience the dangers of rapid urbanization, and the film therefore articulates some of the specific concerns of social policy makers and welfare workers in the Gold Coast. However, the production crew for the film consisted of an all-Ghanaian cast of non-professional actors and technicians with varied relationships to the director, Sean Graham, and his cameraman, George Noble. The practice of “loose” scripting, and the creative contributions of African staff and actors, generated a dense layering of references and associations, some of which were either obscure, or wholly invisible, to the expatriates who commissioned the film. Thus behind the back of colonial prerogative, *The Boy Kumasenu* asserted an alternative narrative of African modernity.

The Politics of Cultural “Adjustment” through Cinema

Memoranda of the inter-war Colonial Office period point to significant anxiety about the destabilizing consequences of rapid social change for Africa’s supposedly fragile social systems (Colonial Office 1925, 1935). Britain’s unhappy experiences in India were invoked by administrators and educationists who advocated a more pro-active approach by government to the regulation and containment of “western” influences in the African colonies (Whitehead 2003; Mayhew 1926 and 1938). While administrators emphasized the benefits of “indirect rule” for rural Africans through “traditional” or “tribal” chiefs (Lugard 1929), educationists devised curricula that were intended to improve the “character and efficiency of the bulk” of the populace (Colonial Office 1935: 5) by promoting local languages, agricultural training and craftsmanship (see also Coe 2002). Colonial governments and

⁵ Throughout this article we refer to the Ghana in the colonial period as either “the Gold Coast” or “colonial Ghana.”

Christian missionary societies, despite their shoestring budgets, were charged with ensuring that schools did not produce a youth which, in pursuit of individualist and materialist ambitions, would neglect its obligations to the rural community, escape the authority of traditional chiefs, and swell the ranks of the urban underemployed (Skinner 2009).

Commercial cinema houses in African towns posed a challenge to these administrative and educational orthodoxies, and indeed to the position of the colonial state as an arbiter of Africans' engagement with, and selection from, other cultures. According to Smyth (1979: 438), Hollywood films were perceived as dangerous vectors of foreign influence, projecting an "unsavoury image of the white race" to "backward peoples" who were deemed to be "in no position to judge between the true and the false."⁶ The Colonial Office's first (largely ineffective) response was censorship, justified by claims that it would protect Africans against the corrupting effects that unsuitable films had exerted among Indian audiences (Smyth 1979: 439; see also Jaikumar 2006).

A second response was advocated by a cluster of educational reformers, missionaries, anthropologists, and medical officers, whose faith in the agency of education and moral uplift could be channelled through the seductive modernity of cinema. Several interwar British experiments aimed to investigate how illiterate audiences "read" images, and responded to these findings by establishing film programs that would assist in the social and cultural "adjustment" of colonial peoples, particularly those who were subject to the new economic forces of cash cropping, labour migration and waged employment. Most notable among these experiments were the health films made in Nigeria by William Sellers, and the Bantu Educational Kinema Experiment, conducted by the International Missionary Council in East and Central Africa (Davis 1933, 1935; Notcutt and Latham 1937; Smyth 1979).

It was not until the outbreak of the Second World War,

⁶ Smyth identifies Sir Hesketh Bell as the most prominent advocate of censorship of films shown in African colonies.

however, that the British government was prepared to commit funds to the regular production and distribution of films for colonial audiences. The Colonial Film Unit (CFU) was established in 1939 by the Ministry of Information (MOI) in order to make films mainly about the war effort for audiences in the colonies. Based in London and headed by George Pearson and William Sellers, the CFU wrestled with diverging agendas.⁷ Whereas the MOI advocated the use of film and newsreel primarily as propaganda that would reinforce loyalty to Britain and strengthen African contributions to the war effort, the Colonial Office retained an interest in experimenting with educational or instructional films that would promote social welfare and economic development. This struggle continued into the post-war era, following the restructuring of the MOI into the Central Office of Information (COI) in 1946.

John Grierson, widely considered to be the leader of the self-promoted British documentary film movement of the interwar period, returned to London in 1948, and was hired to serve as Controller of the Films Division at the COI. This meant that he was a lead figure in reshaping the agenda of the CFU and aligning it more closely with the goals and work of the post-war Colonial Office. The administrative home of the CFU had been transferred to the Colonial Office sometime earlier in April 1950,⁸ and its funding structure relied on the Colonial Development and Welfare Act from 1948-1954. Once its funding was cut by the Colonial Office, this London-based centralized administration for film-making in the colonies was disbanded in 1954.⁹ This did not, however, mark the end for the more recent film units that were

⁷ Public Records Office, Kew, UK (hereafter PRO): CO 875/52/4. See also, "Mr George Pearson," *Colonial Cinema Magazine* 4, no. 3 (September 1946): 55-58. Pearson was senior director of CFU starting in April 1940.

⁸ "Editorial," *Colonial Cinema Magazine* 8, no. 2 (June 1950): 26-29.

⁹ George Pearson, "Hail and Farewell" in *Colonial Cinema* 12, no. 4 (December 1954): 93-96. Sean Graham, however, stayed in the Gold Coast until 1958. Interviews with Sean Graham, 29 January 2010, and 5 February 2010 (for further detail on these interviews see below, note 22).

based within the colonies. In fact, the work of the Gold Coast Film Unit continued until Ghanaian independence in 1957, under the administrative structure of the Gold Coast Information Department (later Information Services). According to an interview that we conducted with Sean Graham, Nkrumah offered Graham the possibility of staying on as director of the film unit, but Graham declined, and returned to London in 1958 after living in Ghana for a ten-year period.¹⁰

Most recently, Okome and Haynes (1995), Haynes (2000) and Larkin (2008), among others, have contextualized the spectacular rise of the 1990s Nigerian video-film industry, otherwise known as Nollywood, through William Sellers' popular early film exhibitions and the travelling cine-van phenomena. But, insofar as the statistics allow us to draw a comparison, it appears that the cine-van was equally important in the Gold Coast. Smyth (1988: 294) indicates that by 1944, 1.7 million Nigerians (less than 10% of the total population) had seen a CFU film, while Larkin (2008: 86) suggests that by 1946, 2.5 million Nigerians were attending mobile cinema shows each year. According to Holbrook (1985: 355), the four cine-vans that belonged to the Gold Coast Information Department had shown films to over 500,000 people (approximately 15% of the total population) by the end of 1941, while in December 1945, the journal *Colonial Cinema* estimated that just one of these four cine-vans had an aggregate audience of one million people since it began operating in June 1940.¹¹ The Gold Coast also saw an exponential increase in access to radio, while information bureaux in the larger towns provided maps, posters and newspapers, including the MOI's weekly broadsheet, *The Empire at War* (Lawler 2002: 161, 170).

¹⁰ Interviews with Sean Graham, 29 January 2010, and 5 February 2010. Graham explained that he returned to London partially because he felt that Nkrumah wanted him to marry Gloria Amon Nikoi (née Addae), who was Graham's girlfriend at the time. Addae was a British-trained economist who later held various government positions, including Foreign Minister for a brief period in 1979.

¹¹ "Reports from Overseas: 1. Gold Coast. Mobile Cinema Van No. 1," *Colonial Cinema Magazine* 3, no. 4 (December 1945): 86.

Mass communication outlets were deployed during the war effort partly because, following the fall of France in 1940, the Gold Coast was surrounded by potentially hostile French colonies whose governors' loyalties lay with the Vichy regime. The Gold Coast Information Department cast aside the interwar preference for directing governmental communications through the chiefs, and embraced mass communication as a rapid and wide-reaching means of disseminating propaganda (Holbrook 1985; Lawler 2002). It sought to foster within the Gold Coast population not only a sense of national contribution to the wider imperial war effort, but, more specifically, a desire to support their 65,000 compatriots who had either volunteered, or been recruited into, the Gold Coast Regiment of the Royal West African Frontier Force (RWAFF).

The short film, *West Africa Was There* (prod. British Movietone, 1945), depicts the 81st and 82nd West African Divisions of the RWAFF, led by Captain J. A. Danford, fighting against Japanese enemy forces in Burma. It features West Africans not only fighting but using radio communication, and it was produced in order to be seen in the colonies. Wounded African soldiers are flown back to Allied hospitals and given the same quality of care as British troops. Further, thanks and appreciation for the work and courage of the West African troops is emphasized throughout, including Lord Mountbatten's salute to them.¹²

The avidity with which African troops availed themselves of educational opportunities within the army, and the apparent success of mass communication experiments among the wider population, stimulated a new interest in mass education in British tropical Africa within the Colonial Office. Arthur Creech Jones, as Secretary of State for the Colonies, was an ardent advocate of mass education as a stimulus to social and economic development and a preparation for citizenship (Skinner 2007a). It was under his leadership that a sub-committee comprising colonial educationists, army officers, missionaries, anthropologists and Fabians produced

¹² Film held at the Imperial War Museum. See catalogue entry for COI 644.

the influential memorandum, “Mass Education in African Society,” which set out the potential and the challenges of cinema (Colonial Office 1943).

Colonial officials serving in the Gold Coast, however, were suspicious of the policy prescriptions emanating from London, and declined to act upon them until prompted by the anti-colonial riots of 1948.¹³ The initial “mass education” work in the Gold Coast, then, was undertaken not by educationists, but by three-person cine-van teams that included a driver-projectionist, assistant projectionist and, perhaps most importantly, the interpreter. Capitalising on wartime infrastructure, these cine-vans showed films about the demobilization of African troops, as well as an assortment of hygiene, educational, and public interest films that were made in Nigeria and the Gold Coast. Some of the titles were made from footage shot by colonial officials in the colonies and reedited in London as part of the Raw Stock Footage Scheme, while others were made with small filmmaking teams led by figures such as William Sellers. Many of the titles that were shown by the cine-vans prior to 1950 were referred to in the pages of *Colonial Cinema Magazine*.¹⁴ They included such films as *Better Pottery* [a.k.a. *Pottery in the Gold Coast*] (1946, CFU), *The Fight Against Tuberculosis in the Home* (1946, CFU), *Good Business* (1947, CFU) [reedited in 1948 as *Nigerian Cocoa Farmers*], *Towards True Democracy* (1947, CFU, Nigeria), *Village Development* (1947, CFU), and *Weaving in Togoland* (1948, CFU), among others.

After a six-month film training school had been held in Accra in 1948, the Public Relations Department of the Gold Coast was reorganized. The Gold Coast Film Unit worked largely indepen-

¹³ At meetings on 14 July and 31 July 1944, the Gold Coast Board of Public Instruction declared itself unwilling to act on the Colonial Office’s 1943 memorandum. Public Records and Administration Department (PRAAD), Accra, RG 3/1/211.

¹⁴ *Colonial Cinema Magazine* appearing monthly between November 1942–December 1954. This publication remains the most explicit record of the Colonial Film Unit during this period.

dently of the London-based CFU throughout the 1950s, operating instead as a part of the Information Department (later Information Services) within the Gold Coast administration.¹⁵ The creation of a separate film unit within the Gold Coast, and the training of African staff, may appear, then, as crucial steps towards the future production of films by Africans and for Africans. Such a narrative, however, would obscure the persistent conflict over the uses of film in the colonies throughout the 1940s and 1950s. This conflict is vital in understanding the reception of *The Boy Kumasenu*, both in the Gold Coast and beyond.

From Primitive Audience to Developmental Subject

The notion of so-called “primitive” audiences on the African continent represented the power of the film form to influence illiterate populations. The “primitive audience” paradigm has a significant legacy within the development of film theory and aesthetics, particularly in relation to linguistic and psychological approaches to the study of film language. Primitive cinema has always been synonymous with early cinema, in part because of its experimental use of film language, but also as a part of the process of training audience expectations (Bloom 2009). The psychological exploration of the spectator through cinema was at once the mass spectator, and a differential one.

Responses to the Ministry of Information’s wartime newsreel and other footage were decidedly mixed. Captain Alec G. Dickson, working with the East Africa Command Mobile Propaganda Unit, found that “Practically 100% of films sent out by the MOI proved quite impossible for Africans” (Dickson 1945, cited in Smyth 1988: 291). At the CFU, therefore, William Sellers developed insights gleaned from his interwar experiments, and articulated ten principles that attempted to address how “natives” think cinema. He asked that these principles be applied to films shown in the colonies.

In addition to (i) photographic clarity, (ii) the presentation of

¹⁵ Information Services also had a radio unit and produced the *Daily Graphic*.

one main idea, and (iii) the clarity of the lesson of the story, he also referred to how the editing of the film could better communicate with African audiences. He claimed that (iv) each scene should be longer than it would otherwise be in a European production, and (v) there should be perfect visual continuity from one shot to the next, while (vi) avoiding any short-circuiting of time and space lest the film become too confusing to follow. Further, Sellers declared that (vii) nothing photographed from an unnatural human perspective, such as a bird's eye view, or a worm's eye view, should be presented, and (viii) technical screen conventions that might seem confusing, such as wipes, mixes, dolly shots, or panning, should be avoided. He counselled that (ix) care should be taken in dealing with psychological problems such as emotional scenes, sex scenes, and scenes of violence, and emphasized (x) strict attention to an economy of words in a spoken sequence.¹⁶

The CFU was aware that many of its films were shot in Britain and included no African characters.¹⁷ A cheap means of including African figures and African landscapes was the Raw Stock Footage Scheme through which British colonial officers were supplied with 16mm Cine-Kodak cameras, tripods, lights and film magazines. They were requested to shoot material that could be sent back to London and edited into films.¹⁸ *Good Business*, a film about the marketing of cocoa by a Nigerian business collective, was noted by Sellers as one of the most successful films produced through this effort, while Arthur Campion's work on Kenya delighted both Colonial Office and MOI officials such that it provided the basis for films such as *Progress in the Colonies* (1944, CFU) as well as the archetypal scenes of hospitals,

¹⁶ PRO: CO 875/10/9: George Pearson (Correspondence), "Films for Primitives," October 29, 1942, Public Relations, Colonial Propaganda, Colonial Film Unit, 1942/1943. See also Larkin (2008) on this subject.

¹⁷ Some of these films included, *Mr English at Home*, *The British Army*, *British Soldiers*, *The Royal Air Force*, *The Story of Cotton*, *Guns in the Desert*, *Progress in the Colonies*, and *Wartime Family*.

¹⁸ "The Raw Stock Footage Scheme: Retrospect and Prospect," *Colonial Cinema* 3, no. 4 (December 1945): 76-79.

dispensaries, schools and major infrastructure projects.

Navigating between the immediate need for war propaganda, and a longer-term vision of cinema as an educational medium, the CFU functioned as an ongoing media psychology experiment on the African continent. In 1943, an extensive survey, organized in four categories, was sent to show CFU and MOI films in Ceylon (present-day Sri Lanka), the Gold Coast, Kenya, Nigeria, Nyasaland (present-day Malawi), Sierra Leone, Tanganyika (present-day Tanzania), and Uganda. The survey addressed (i) suggestions and comments about films, (ii) techniques of production, (iii) arrangement of programs, and (iv) audience reactions. Although this initial survey formed the basis for early approaches to screening programs from the cinema vans, the question of audience reaction remained a pressing concern.

The memorandum “Mass Education in African Society” thus expressed enthusiasm for investigating the contribution of film to mass education programmes, and recognized the possibilities of film in stimulating economic development and preparing colonial populations for national citizenship. However, the journal *Colonial Cinema* remained sceptical. As the editor [Blackburn] writes,

...owing to the lack of evidence about the effect of films in any educational sense on colonial peoples, coupled with the fact that the cinema is universally popular, the report sounds a note of warning about laying undue emphasis on its reception and effectiveness upon backward peoples. The cinema must be regarded as supplementary to, and not a substitute for, the teacher.¹⁹

The memorandum recommended more intensive research into “the use of sound and silent film with audiences of particular *grades* [emphasis added].” Sociological and psychological research was deemed necessary in moving towards the making of films that were not only comprehensible to a “primitive” audience, but which also directly addressed the members of this audience as developmental subjects.

¹⁹ “Editorial,” *Colonial Cinema* 2, no. 2 (February 1944): 1.

It was not until 1950, however, that Peter Morton-Williams undertook an ethnographic study of audience reactions in three areas of Nigeria, demonstrating that African audiences were equally capable to their European counterparts in interpreting that which appeared on screen (Morton-Williams 1950; see also Burns 2000). With the publication of his report and its circulation by the Colonial Office, Sellers' emphasis on simplifying demonstrations in educational films for uninstructed African audiences rapidly lost credibility. Nonetheless, these findings were doubted by some film educationalists, such as Alan Izod in Southern Rhodesia (present-day Zimbabwe). In the Gold Coast, mass education, community development, and social welfare workers continued to express their scepticism into the Independence era, arguing that film could not have any truly educative effect on rural audiences unless it was shown at structured community meetings where its purpose could be clearly explained and reinforced by an interpreter (Pickering 1958; Du Sautoy 1958; Hodge 1959).

From the mid-1940s, through the 1950s, then, expatriates debated the educational value of film, and considered how films could be better produced and disseminated to serve the aims of social welfare and economic development.²⁰ These discussions revolved around two key questions: who was to make the films, and how were they to make them. On the first point, Grierson argued that the aim should be "Films for Africans, with Africans, by Africans," and advocated the role of the CFU in organising training schools for the African filmmakers who would staff future units based in the colonies (cited in Smyth 1992: 165; see also Grierson 1948). On the second point, John Maddison (1948: 305-9), a civil servant working with Grierson in the Films Division of the COI, emphasized the critical importance of using "special techniques of editing, a slow narrative 'tempo' and other tech-

²⁰ Smyth (1992: 164-5) indicates that "In 1948 the British Film Institute sponsored a conference on Film in Colonial Development; a paper on 'The Use of Cinema in African Territories' was read at a Colonial Office summer conference on African administration; and instructional films featured in [the Colonial Office memorandum] *Education for Citizenship*."

niques necessary to address Africans lacking culture.” He continued, however, by pointing out that “...[t]hese techniques are not based merely on a difference of mind, but rather on the conviction that they have not yet reached the same stage of development. Nonetheless, with time [...] the need for specialized techniques will disappear.” The next question, of course, was when.

It was a Gold Coaster who launched one the earliest critiques of the evolving screencraft of the CFU. Having served as a cine-van commentator during the war and the first African scriptwriter, John [G. B.] Oduntun received his training at the Unit’s headquarters in London after completing his first degree at Oxford, and joined the Gold Coast Film Unit in 1949, when it was reorganized (Holbrook 1985: 356, fn 40; Pike 1989: 9). In Oduntun’s exchange in *Colonial Cinema Magazine* with George Pearson and Norman Spurr, he argued that the CFU was lagging behind its audience, failing to reflect its social and cultural aspirations, relying on simplistic plots, omitting the “seamy side of life” and spelling out “painfully obvious moral lessons.” Patronising European commentaries, he suggested, should be replaced by films with more challenging formats that employed a story-telling idiom (Smyth 1992: 169). Oduntun’s perspective was closely aligned with that of Morton-Williams, although not expressed in the same social scientific language of the audience study. One film that Oduntun did commend, however, was *Amenu’s Child* (dir. Sean Graham, 1950). The integration of the competing agendas and the filmmaking capacity of the Gold Coast Film Unit only began to emerge once Sean Graham arrived in Accra in late December 1948.

Local Idiom, Expatriate Director

As Sean Graham explained in two extensive interviews conducted by the authors, he arrived in Accra as head of the Gold Coast Film Unit (GCFU) at the behest of John Grierson.²¹ Graham was born in

²¹ The first interview was conducted by Peter J. Bloom and Kate Skinner on 29 January 2010 with the intermittent presence of and contributing commentary by

Hamburg, Germany in 1920. Of German Jewish origin, his original name was Hans Friedrich Eisler. He went to England in the early 1930s and lived with his maternal uncle and aunt as a teenager, only becoming a naturalized British citizen as an adult. He briefly worked for the well-known documentary filmmaker Paul Rotha prior to the war, where he met Yvonne Fletcher, a young woman director working with Rotha. Graham explained that Fletcher gave him his first in-depth familiarity with filmmaking. Around this time, Graham attended Cambridge for two years prior to serving in the British army. After seven years of war service (two more than the mandatory five years because of his crucial language skills as a native German speaker), he sought employment in the filmmaking world, with only limited success. After finishing a final year at Cambridge, Graham's link to the Cambridge set might have allowed some limited association with Grierson's documentary circle, as it did before the war, although most members of this circle were a generation older than him (see Fox 2005).

Grierson assigned Graham to the Gold Coast, which was completely unfamiliar to him. Although Graham was not especially drawn to his fellow expatriate civil servants, he was, instead, compelled by the utopian potential of cinema. He was appointed director of a small unit charged with fielding a very large number of requests for films (mainly from government departments); furthermore, he had limited confidence in the interpreters and disdain for those who saw cinema primarily as an instructional medium. The surprising issue relative to Graham's role as director was the challenge of making appealing films in a local linguistic and performative idiom. Departments of government tended to come to GCFU with very specific requests for films intended to raise awareness of a particular issue, such as inducing Africans to pay their local rates, spray their cocoa trees, or drive more safely. From the point of view of these departments, then, film was merely an effective technique of communication that

Catherine Graham (Sean Graham's wife), while the second was conducted on 5 February 2010 by Peter J. Bloom, Tom Rice, and Emma Sandon.

followed their policy prescription.

Graham, however, found the creative potential of such instructional films to be limiting, and wanted to emphasize a story-telling approach that was allied with his ambition to become a feature-length narrative film director. Graham was not particularly interested in the debate regarding African audience reaction, so important to figures like Odunton, Pearson, Sellers, and Spurr. Instead, it was the quality of his work, and his ability to produce an industrial film within a three month period within budget, for approximately £3,000 per film, that allowed him to continue his work relatively unhindered. Graham's interest in filmmaking, as opposed to the colonial culture of the Gold Coast, challenges preconceived notions about colonial cinema (see Ukadike 1994).

Graham vividly remembers the purchase of a massive camera crane, acquired while he was on leave in London, from a studio that had gone into liquidation. He paid only £50 for this crane, which he had shipped from Britain to the Gold Coast, further illustrating his ambition as a feature filmmaker. The crane (which, under normal circumstances, should have cost approximately £20,000) was used for a dance sequence in his film *Jaguar* ([a. k. a. *Highlife*] dir. Sean Graham, 1958, 12'), in spite of the fact that George Noble, the cameraman, was uncertain about how to use it. *The Boy Kumasenu* was yet another example of Graham's ambition as a feature filmmaker, as opposed to an industrial educational filmmaker. Although he was commissioned to make a short educational film on juvenile delinquency, presumably by the Department of Social Welfare and Community Development, he made a nearly full-length feature.

When his direct superior James Moxon (then the deputy director of Information Services) objected to his film, Graham simply established a business arrangement with a Syrian owner of a chain of commercial cinema houses, where it made back the production costs in less than three weeks. Graham describes his relationships with his immediate filmmaking team, and with Information Services colleagues as a mix of enduring friendship with Dr Oku Ampofo (who plays Dr Tamakloe), camaraderie with

George Noble (his cameraman), and childish disdain for James Moxon. Initially, Moxon threatened to fire Graham for turning an educational film addressing juvenile delinquency into a feature-length production. However, following the success of the film, Moxon glossed over his initial reaction to Graham with the quip, “Can’t you take a joke?”²²

Local Idiom, African Staff

The contradictory nature of forces leading to the production of films undertaken by the GCFU underlies our examination of *The Boy Kumasenu*. Unlike film production units with a streamlined organization of talent, location scouting, skilled technical personnel, and reliable equipment, the GCFU began with limited resources that only included a small fleet of cars, trucks, a generator, four 16mm cameras and an array of grip equipment. As Graham puts it, “bits and pieces of a production unit on a shoestring budget” were all that they had at their disposal. Graham explains that there were only two or three full-time mechanics to service their vehicles and a flow of unevenly trained personnel, including Graham himself, who had only limited filmmaking experience prior to arriving in Accra.²³

Reportedly, the sound recordist Peter Hoyle came later from London, and Graham recruited amateur actors (who were unpaid apart from meals) thanks to assistance from several of the African trainees who were working for the unit. Frank Tamakloe in particular, who plays the role of Agboh in the film, served as Graham’s production assistant. Samuel Aryeetey went on to edit many GCFU films, while R. O. Fenuku became the camera operator. Many of the technicians were originally brought in through Achimota College, while Aryeetey and Fenuku were also members of the six-month training school organized by the London-based CFU but held in Accra in 1948. The course was led by H. M. K. Howson, a long-serving employee from Kodak

²² Interviews with Sean Graham, 29 January 2010, and 5 February 2010.

²³ Interview with Sean Graham, 29 January 2010.

Harrow, and Lionel Snazelle, who went on to lead the Nigerian Colonial Film Unit.²⁴ Chris Hesse, who joined the GCFU in 1952, describes this training school as “the start of the whole thing.” Aryeetey, Fenuku, and Hesse all went on to serve as directors of the Ghana Film Industry Corporation in the Independence era.²⁵

According to Hesse, “Sean did a fantastic job” as head of the GCFU, because he saw beyond the crude use of film to promote the objectives of “our colonial masters,” and wanted instead to “weave a story with real characters.” The African staff within the GCFU made a very significant contribution to the realization of this objective. Graham recalls that he became the scriptwriter essentially “by force majeure” (because the unit had such a small staff), while Hesse recalls that some of the original ideas for plot lines were put forward by Graham’s assistant, Vanderpuye, “because Sean is not from our culture.”²⁶ When we queried Graham about how he rehearsed with the talent, he mentioned that he would often work with a loose script, and where dialogue in the local African language was to be introduced, he would frequently act out scenes for them as a form of “patterning.” Although Graham had limited understanding of the nuances in the African language dialogue, the result of his collaboration with the talent went well beyond what Sellers had called “stilted imitations of European behavior;” rather it incorporated a series of metaphors and associations that are present in the film.²⁷ In subsequent films, such as *Progress at Kojokrom* (1953), and *Mr Mensah Builds a House* (1955), local African language dialogue became more important and, according to Hesse, it became more common for actors to be handed a fully translated script prepared by an African

²⁴ See “The British Film Institute: Commonwealth Film Production,” Summer 1950, Programme of Films. [Held at the] Institut Français Theatre, Kensington, 8 p.m. Signed by Dennis Forman. University of Stirling. The John Grierson Archive. Reference number: 5:20:3.

²⁵ Interview with Chris Hesse, 23 June 2010.

²⁶ Interview with Sean Graham, 29 January 2010, and interview with Chris Hesse, 23 June 2010.

²⁷ Interview with Sean Graham, 29 January 2010.

translator.

The supplemental dimensionality to the film brought in by the actors and technicians inflected the intentions of Graham, as director, and George Noble, the cameraman, as well as the wider administrative structure in which they worked. *The Boy Kumasenu*, among other films produced by the GCFU, addressed multiple audiences. Audiences in the Gold Coast, in particular, may have been attracted to features of which the filmmaker and producer were only partially aware.

The Boy Kumasenu: An Overview

The film opens in a fishing village, and Kumasenu is introduced as an orphan who is cared for by his aunt and uncle.²⁸ Kumasenu spends much of his time with his restless and stubborn cousin, Agboh, who wants to seek his fortune in the city. Kumasenu's aunt is concerned by the restlessness of the two boys, but her approach to a "fetish priest" does not have any effect on their desire to leave the village. Unlike Agboh, who simply runs away in the night, Kumasenu asks permission from his Uncle Fiawoo (Robert Nunoo) to leave. The uncle initially refuses, but after a bad fishing catch, Fiawoo and his fellow fishermen conclude that "the spirits have marked Kumasenu to go." Fiawoo therefore introduces Kumasenu to a friend, Mr Zigbalou (uncredited), who offers him a job working at his bar in the Anlo-Ewe town of Keta. Here, Kumasenu observes the lorry drivers who come to the bar to drink, discuss women, and dance to Zigbalou's phonograph. The narrator informs us that Zigbalou is making easy money by storing and selling smuggled goods, and Kumasenu observes him hiding this money in a box that he buries in his backyard.

Things begin to go wrong when Mr Zigbalou travels to a funeral, leaving Kumasenu in charge of the bar. Agboh reappears at this juncture, dressed like a gangster from an American B

²⁸ The village is not named by the narrator, although according to the credits at the end of the film, it was shot in Kedzi on the Anlo-Ewe coastline in south-eastern Ghana.

movie, and he convinces Kumasenu to go to Accra, where “much money [is] to be had.” Agboh goads Kumasenu by calling him a “bushboy,” which prompts Kumasenu to lead Agboh to Mr Zigbalou’s buried money. Agboh keeps most of this money, but hands Kumasenu a ten-pound note and urges him to be on his way. Upon Kumasenu’s arrival in Accra with neither food nor shelter, he is taken under the wing of a beautiful young woman, Adobia (Angela Nanoor).

The narrator reveals that Adobia makes her money by day selling goods which she collects from a wholesaler, while at night she “enjoys the protection” of a wealthy lawyer, Mr Mensah (Robert Baffuor). Adobia, however, “is known to many men but is a friend to none,” thus initiating an affair with Mensah’s chauffeur. When the lawyer discovers this, he manoeuvres for both the offending parties to be arrested, leaving Kumasenu alone once more. Hungry and without resources, Kumasenu attempts to steal a loaf of bread, but is captured immediately by a policeman and taken to the station and later identified as a child “in need of care.” Before his court hearing, therefore, the police take Kumasenu to be interviewed by a medical doctor and sculptor, Dr Tamakloe, and his wife Grace, who feeds him and listens to his story. Grace urges her husband to consider that, if their only child (a daughter) were to end up like Kumasenu, what would they want a responsible adult to do? In a remarkable sequence preceding Kumasenu’s adoption by the Tamakloes, Kumasenu attempts to evoke the power of one of his grandmother’s charms in order to avert being sent to a juvenile reformatory. His sense of fear is demonstrated through a series of flash forward projections, and Kumasenu’s repetition of a phrase associated with the charm that he wears contributes to a splitting effect in the narration: Kumasenu believes that the positive outcome of being adopted by the Tamakloes is motivated by the charm, whereas the English voiceover narration describes the judicial procedure that leads Kumasenu to be adopted.

Grace urges her husband not simply to use the boy as a muse for his sculptures, but rather to guide him. The doctor therefore

places Kumasenu in an apprenticeship with a motorized boat owner. Just as Kumasenu flourishes in this new life, Agboh reappears as an ominous portent, first asking Kumasenu to leave the doctor's surgery unlocked to facilitate a proposed burglary, and then "persuading" Kumasenu by dragging him to the outskirts of the city where he is beaten by Agboh's gang. When the gang breaks into the surgery, however, Kumasenu decides that he must act. He pursues Agboh, and challenges him to a fight, creating the noise that allows the police to catch up with and arrest Agboh. Thus Kumasenu finally throws off his cousin's negative influence, and comes of age. While Kumasenu returns to the Tamakloes, and to his work on a motorized fishing boat, his story reaches Uncle Fiawoo, who mulls over the story of the two boys, and is thus motivated to pray for the young generation, "the striplings on whose shoulders rest the burden of change."

Addressing the Developmental Subject

There are several key respects in which *The Boy Kumasenu* illustrates and reinforces messages that were articulated in late colonial social welfare reports along with other films produced by the GCFU. Foremost among these messages is a concern over rural-urban migration and the need for greater family and state guidance of vulnerable youths who were encountering a range of unregulated, and thus pernicious, western influences. This dilemma is captured in microcosm in the film's depiction of Agboh. In one scene Agboh is framed leaning against a doorframe wearing a light-coloured suit with a tilted hat and a cigarette in his mouth; in another—when Agboh and his friends abduct Kumasenu for the purpose of "persuading" him to abet their burglary—the narrator explains that Agboh and his gang were influenced by the imitative contagion of American gangster films. This alludes to a specific concern of Gold Coast social welfare officers, whose research among juvenile delinquents in Accra tracked the amount of time they spent in and around cinema houses, concluding that the

cinema was an influence on their criminal behavior.²⁹

While cash-strapped inter-war governments had tended to rely on authoritarian methods to contain what they perceived as the dangerous influence of American films, the post-war Department of Social Welfare and Community Development also sought to undercut such influences, firstly by identifying the most vulnerable groups, and secondly by working with educated African volunteers to provide alternative forms of supervision and “improving” leisure activities, in both urban and rural areas (see Skinner 2007a, 2009; and Plageman 2008). Film could be used to project this image of the late colonial state as a benign agent vis-à-vis its developmental subject.

Vulnerability of children and youths is a recurrent theme in the reports of urban social welfare workers, who believed that many children were inadequately parented due to factors that they associated with cultural “adjustment”: polygamous fathers were often absent from the homes of their biological children and made insufficient financial provision for them, compelling mothers to work outside the home and placing too great a burden on members of the extended family (Department of Social Welfare and Community Development 1951: 15-17). In addition to paternalistic measures such as the day nursery movement (later embraced and extended by female activists in the Convention People’s Party), late colonial welfare workers acknowledged that new forms of inequality had emerged, particularly in children’s access to schooling, and this was presented as a social problem to be addressed by the state in this period of political transition (Department of Social Welfare and Community Development 1951: 13).

The late colonial period thus saw the adoption of a “case work”

²⁹ Geoffrey Tooth, “A Survey of Juvenile Delinquency in the Gold Coast,” Accra, December 1946. Rhodes House: Colonial Reports 1946. Mss. No. 722.125 4/1946(1). We are grateful to Stacey Hynd for sharing another relevant document from the University of Exeter Ghana Collection: “Children and the Cinema. A Report on an Enquiry into Cinema Going among Juveniles undertaken by the Department of Social Welfare and Community Development in Accra and Kumasi.”

approach towards delinquent minors. Juvenile reformatories were increasingly viewed as a last resort for only the most hardened cases, and welfare officers emphasized that many first-time offenders were easily redeemable. Thus when Kumasenu attempts to steal a loaf of bread, the police constables uphold the law by arresting him, but they are also humane, identifying him on his charge sheet as a child “in need of care.” The charge sheet deploys the very phrase that was used in social welfare reports, and its poignancy is intensified by the audience’s prior knowledge that Kumasenu is illiterate: he is unable to forge his own identity through writing, but is awaiting definition by benign agents of the late colonial state.

Recognizing that state facilities were inadequate, welfare workers advocated the “boarding out” of young offenders with “fit persons” who, in the absence of reliable biological parents, would volunteer to provide care, guidance and supervision in their own homes. Dr Tamakloe thus becomes a critical figure in establishing an appropriate path for Kumasenu, materialized as a character-building form of skilled manual work (Department of Social Welfare and Community Development 1951: 25 and 33; see also Foster 1965 and Miescher 2005). The importance of mothering and the duties implied by maternity is also evoked through Grace’s sympathy towards Kumasenu, and this thematic element is even more important in *Amenu’s Child*, a subsequent well-regarded production. In their roles as Dr and Mrs Tamakloe, Dr Oku Ampofo and his wife acted as themselves, thus consciously modelling appropriate ways in which educated Africans could combine social responsibility with compassion. Graham developed a life-long friendship with them, explaining that Oku Ampofo was trained as a doctor at the University of Edinburgh, specializing in sickle-cell anaemia.³⁰

To the extent that Graham, his staff and his actors created a film that conveyed a message towards a developmental subject, it was about the delicate and difficult work of navigating an

³⁰ Interview with Sean Graham, 29 January 2010.

“African” path towards modernity as exemplified (or perhaps idealized) by Dr Tamakloe and his wife. Despite the distinctly British voice-over – effecting a more pejorative colonial expression of Africa’s “problems” – the end of the film anticipates the role of Ghanaians, particularly those who are educated, as the ultimate arbiters of the most appropriate blend of “the old and the new,” and charged with guiding youth past the “snares and pitfalls” on their road to an African modernity.

Modernity and Danger

Although the voice-over directs the audience’s interpretation of the plot, there are some specific elements that permit alternative readings that may not have been anticipated by the expatriates who commissioned and directed this film. In the opening scene, we learn that Kumasenu is an orphan. The meaning of his Ewe name is “death does not listen,” which implies that death has taken away a series of family members without regard for this child. The orphan was a protagonist easily recognizable to Ghanaian audiences from popular fiction and theatre. After losing his biological parents, the orphan is taken in by an extended family out of a sense of obligation, but will never be treated as an equal of the “real” children of the foster parents. Descriptions of 1950s and 1960s concert party, including the play *Egyankaba* (Cole 2001: 133-58) and *Orphan Do Not Glance* (Collins 1997: 56-91; Jaguar Jokers 1997: 92-116) indicate the strength of sympathy engendered in members of the audience by the lonely and struggling figure of the orphan. Actors described to Cole (2001: 146-7) how spectators would hurl missiles at the wicked stepmother characters who neglected or abused an orphan while spoiling their own children. Similarly, Collins (1997: 85) describes how, during performances of *Orphan Do Not Glance*, audience members would bring food on to the stage in response to Kofi Antobam’s lament that “he is hungry because his stepmother does not feed him.” By the same logic, the tenderness shown by Grace Tamakloe towards Kumasenu would elicit deep approval.

While the orphan represents the frequent and bitter conflicts

between extended and nuclear families in Ghana, and thus triggers intense emotional responses from the audience, he is also an ideal character for the didactic element of the plot. Although social policy-makers and welfare officers clearly wished to convey particular messages about the dangers of rural-urban migration among the youth, it would be wrong to categorize the didactic element of this film as purely “colonial.” Scholars of popular theatre, fiction, and even political propaganda and autobiography, have all noted that African authors and performers in this period frequently adopted a didactic tone and framework in addressing their readers and audiences (see for example Miescher 2006 and Skinner 2007b). Indeed Newell (2000: 19-27) argues that Ghanaian readers expected fiction to be “educational” in the sense of helping them to make better choices in their own lives, and thus authors usually emphasized on their front and back covers that the pages within would give good advice. Cole (2001: 9) goes even further in her interpretation of mid twentieth-century concert party, following Gyekye’s (1995) argument that in Akan thought education cannot exist separately from action, i.e., one learns in order to do.

Lacking the direct guidance of his parents, and finding himself in the city far away from extended kin, Kumasenu must learn for himself how to discriminate between a range of characters and their different ways of living. The orphan figure is thus a means of foregrounding how an individual’s character is shaped and enabled to remap his destiny. Kumasenu, then, does not simply represent the social problem of rural-urban migration. Although he is initially positioned as a victim, a cipher primed for transformation through the actions of a benevolent state and compassionate fellow citizens, this is not enough to save him: it is only in the penultimate scene, where he fights with Agboh and throws off his malignant influence, that Kumasenu finally comes of age.

It is the gradual development of Kumasenu’s capacity to discriminate between those who try to influence his choices, for good or for ill, that functions as the educational demonstration in the film. The characters whom he encounters tend to parody

extreme lifestyles, or to expose their true nature and meet dramatic ends. Thus Adobia, the proto-typical *femme fatale*, is ultimately arrested through the covert manoeuvrings of her cuckolded lover Mr Mensah, the educated and westernized but dishonest lawyer. Writing of popular theatre, Barber (1997: 15) emphasises the tendency towards highly dramatic plots in which characters face abrupt reversals of fortune – including “rags to riches” and “riches to rags” story lines. It is therefore not so much the plausibility of events which sustains audience interest, as the deployment of what Cole (2001: 152) describes as “dense signifiers.”

Although the name “Kumasenu” carries a significant index of meaning for Ghanaian audiences, the presence and uses of money are also highly evocative.³¹ It is Kumasenu’s initial proximity to money that marks his fraught entry into the dangers of the urban environment. Zigbalou’s bar in Keta is coded as a dangerous environment, and it is here, under the influence of alcohol, and in close physical proximity to smuggled goods, that Kumasenu commits his first major transgression (the theft of his employer’s money) that haunts him through the rest of the film. While Agboh ultimately proves himself criminal beyond redemption, at this stage he is not depicted as preternaturally bad: rather he has allowed himself to be “owned” by money. Kumasenu’s desire to leave the village is presented as a product of mental curiosity, such that he asks his uncle, “How can it be wrong to want to go, to learn to read and write, or to find out how an iron car moves as fast as a shark?” Agboh, on the other hand, is driven by a quest for riches. He seeks his younger cousin’s admiration by waving a fistful of banknotes in his face, and is thus using money to “inflate” himself, rather than engaging in the hard work and enterprise that would enable him to grow into a person of real substance (see also McCaskie 1986).

Kumasenu’s moral consciousness lapses in an environment in which “bad money” circulates: he is tempted by money, yet afraid

³¹ There is an abundant literature on the role of money in colonial West Africa. A sample of important works includes McCaskie 1986; Barber 1995; Guyer 1995; Lindsay 2003a, 2003b.

of its potency. Seemingly extraneous details – such as Kumasenu’s desire to be blindfolded when he directs Agboh to Mr Zigbalou’s buried box, and his claim that the money is burning the sole of his foot – indicate that money is a “hot” or dangerous substance that owns the will of those who touch it. Once Kumasenu has accepted the stolen ten pound note from Agboh, and run away to Accra, things begin to go seriously wrong for him.

Money is also significant in establishing an unfavourable comparison between Adobia – the first woman to take Kumasenu under her wing – and Grace, who ultimately adopts him. While Adobia works as a trader and supplements this income through her relationships with Mr Mensah among other men, Grace’s relationship to money is mediated by her husband. In their first exchange, Grace urges the doctor to put his accounts in order, and asks whether his reluctance to force patients to pay may simply encourage them to plead an exaggerated degree of poverty. In his response, Dr Tamakloe explains that if this were true, it would be on the conscience of the dishonest patient, whereas a refusal to treat a genuinely poor patient would be on his own conscience. This exchange, though extraneous to the development of the plot, establishes that, unlike Adobia or Agboh, the doctor is not “owned” by money – he acts according to his conscience, and Grace’s acceptance of his choice is shown as a positive effect of their companionable marriage.

Lastly, the critical moment in which Kumasenu’s new life comes under threat is illustrated through a specific location replete with potentially unstable and polluting substances. In order to persuade him to abet their proposed burglary, Agboh and his gang “kidnap” Kumasenu in the orderly residential area and take him to the railway tracks on the outskirts of the town where sour cocoa beans and other trash is being burned. In this interstitial space, Agboh takes Kumasenu’s shoes, calls him a bushboy, and threatens to burn his feet. Just as the shoes embody Kumasenu’s good fortune and his urban mobility, Agboh’s taunt of “bushboy” and his threat to burn his cousin’s feet recall the earlier scene in which Kumasenu was tempted to impress Agboh by leading him to

Zigbalou's buried money. Although Kumasenu has been offered a new life through the intervention of the police, the justice system and the compassion of the Tamakloes, this scene demonstrates Kumasenu's recognition of Agboh as antithetical to values that he can come to embrace, such that he must act as a social agent to stop Agboh in pursuit of his own future.

Thus when Agboh's gang finally break into the doctor's surgery, Kumasenu pursues Agboh, and starts a fight with him. The ensuing brawl functions as a public forum in which the responsiveness of neighbours and the police finally enable Agboh to be brought to justice. In a final sequence, the Tamakloes stand proudly on a pier as they watch Kumasenu on a motorboat, dressed as a professional member of the fishing crew.

Conclusion

The Boy Kumasenu conveys that the city is more dangerous than the village. The village fetish priest is ineffective (in reducing the boys' restlessness) and Kumasenu's grandmother's charm is positively benign (in saving him from the juvenile reformatory). The city, on the other hand, carries a range of dangerous substances and dubious characters. The image of the dusty road to Accra is revealing. It is the road from the village to the city, or the path from tradition to the modern. It is a road that Kumasenu's uncle does not want to take, but it also throws up dirt in people's faces, and is governed by lorry drivers with their pidgin vernacular and immoral behavior. The road, as we find out, certainly does not lead in any straightforward way to modernity. Rather, as the narrator concludes, it is a road full of snares, pitfalls, and danger.³²

If there is a conclusion that could be reached by analysing the

³² This interpretation runs counter to other analyses of *The Boy Kumasenu* which argue that the film presents modernity as an urban phenomena gifted to Africans by the colonial state. We are grateful to Carmella Garritano for sharing a discussion of this theme. Her interpretation is developed further in "Mapping the Modern: The Gold Coast Film Unit and the Ghana Film Industry Corporation" which is the first chapter of an unpublished book manuscript entitled *Ghanaian Video Movies and Global Desires*.

complex combinations of expatriate intentions and local idioms in the work of the Gold Coast Film Unit, it lies in this film's examination of how a young boy achieves redemption. This is not to be achieved by severing ties with the village, but rather by finding the correct blend of old and new. This is partly a message about the benign role of the state and of educated Africans in mediating social adjustment and adaptation now that a significant measure of political control had been passed to African nationalists in the new Legislative Assembly. But *The Boy Kumasenu* also hints at the training of character as a form of education, and the necessity of parental discipline as a metaphor for political authority. These elements are developed in later work of the GCFU, notably *Mr Mensah Builds a House* (1955), and provide a unique insight into the developmentalist ideologies of the late-colonial and post-colonial era.

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